# Putting a Premium on Pixels:
# Ways to master the emerging world of official online advertising to enhance constituent communications

## January 2012

## OVERVIEW

Over the past two years, Members of Congress have increasingly turned to official online advertising to augment their presence on the Internet. Several million dollars in MRA funds have been spent in an attempt to inform constituents about services that would benefit them, as well as provide new venues for Members to communicate more consistently with residents in their districts. The question is: Is it working? How do we measure effectiveness? Can we?

These are questions that have dogged the advertising world for more than a century. The late 19th and early 20th century marketing and retailing legend, John Wanamaker, famously said, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half." And the reality is that while the Internet makes it significantly easier for retailers (such as a Wanamaker) to know which advertising is working and which isn't, the question as it applies to Capitol Hill is much murkier. The reason is that success, unlike profitability, is in the eye of the beholder.

For example, for some House Members, a successful online advertising effort is about building one's file of opt-in e-newsletter subscribers. For others, it is about generating more "likes" on Facebook. And for others still, it is about going beyond these hard metrics, and building a more robust online discussion among constituents about the Member's activities in Washington, and in the process generating more goodwill. It is easier to evaluate some of these metrics than others,

but the question remains for Members: "Even if I can count something, how do I know it's really having an impact?"

Further complicating the discussion of success is the question of allocating limited resources. In theory, with unlimited funds, House offices could generate consistent and substantive dialogue with every constituent in the district. Given the significant 2011 and 2012 MRA cuts, however, offices have to do more with less, so meeting constituents' expectations about hearing from Members is ever-more-challenging, and requires the use of cutting-edge communications tools. The question this study helps to answer is how best to use them.

It should be noted that some people view the different communication methods on a continuum of efficacy. As one senior House staffer who has worked extensively on communications told us:

> "A recipient may glance at a printed piece or mail, or view an online ad, and retain an impression of the contact. If it is a positive impression, that can be a good thing. Further along the continuum, the recipient may read the mail piece, or click on the ad to find out more information. Further still, they might be prompted to fill out the mail piece's reply card to share their reaction, or take some action spurred by the online ad such as signing up for your e-newsletter or 'liking' you on Facebook. Quantitative data on the relative values of these different levels of engagement remains limited, but the direct marketing experience would suggest that they can all be valuable.

> Even a low-level engagement helps build deeper engagements further down the continuum. What the data from this study does show is that some mediums of communication can be more cost effective in generating the deeper level engagements further along on the continuum, so Member offices should at least be incorporating these mediums in their communications program, and ideally be targeting them to receptive audiences to receive the most "bang for the buck."

As with any research study that looks into a topic for the first time, this first-ever, in-depth analysis of official online advertising offers a number of answers to the "low hanging fruit" questions. But it also raises a number of new questions and leaves other questions unanswered. We view it as a first look into a topic that merits future study by us and others in the years to come.

In order to undertake this current study, very special thanks belong to Mark Strand, the President of the Congressional Institute. His ongoing commitment to cutting-edge research, combined with the generous support of the Congressional Institute's board of directors, is having a substantial impact on how well and how often Congress communicates with constituents.

We are especially indebted to the staff and leadership at FrankingGrid. Rich Masterson and Jeff Dittus generously made their staff available to us on an ongoing basis throughout the course of this research, and provided valuable guidance. Rob Carter enthusiastically provided a constant stream of vital insights and suggestions, and also kept the trains moving on time. And Megan Cellucci pulled massive amounts of data together for us, providing it in a format that was easy to

sort and comprehend. Through her dedication, organization, and responsiveness, she made the analysis process infinitely easier than it would have been without her.

# SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS/TABLE OF CONTENTS

## METHODOLOGY

Presentation Testing, Inc. partnered with FrankingGrid, a leading political online advertising agency headquartered in Fort Washington, PA, to analyze official online advertisement data from Congressional offices. We studied a total of 215,024,576 impressions that ran from January 1, 2010 through October 31, 2011 across 45 House offices.

Approximately 122 million impressions were in the form of display advertisements. Display advertisements typically contain text, logos, or images. Here is an example:
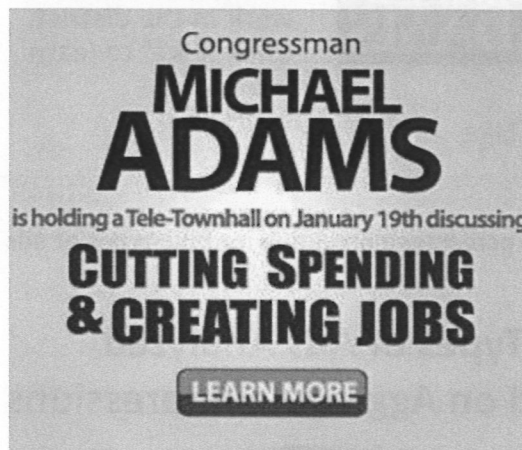


Approximately 3.5 million impressions were in the form of search advertisements. Search ads are text-based, include a hyperlink, and generally appear on search engines such as Google or Yahoo when viewers conduct a search. Here is an example:

Finally, approximately 89.5 million impressions were in the form of Facebook advertisements. Facebook advertisements will appear on the right side of the webpage, and can be targeted to very specific demographic and geographic preferences. Here is an example:

**Congressman Michael Adams**

Congressman Michael Adams is here to serve you and your family. Get updates on his work in the district. Click "Like" to learn more

👍 Like·
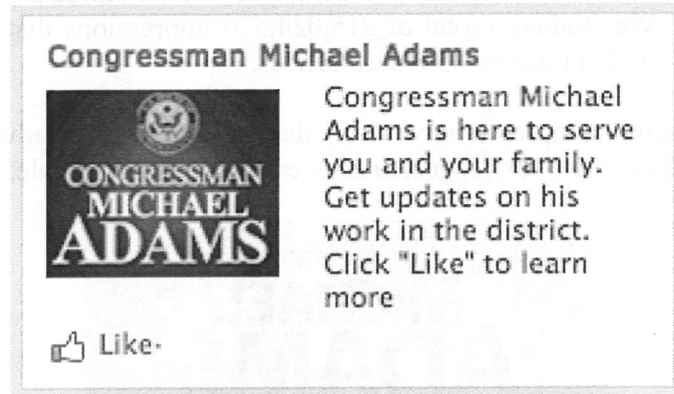
Here is a graph showing the percentage breakdown of the types of ads we analyzed:

## Types of Ads Analyzed
## Based on Aggregate Impressions

Facebook 41.7%

Display 56.7%

Search 1.6%
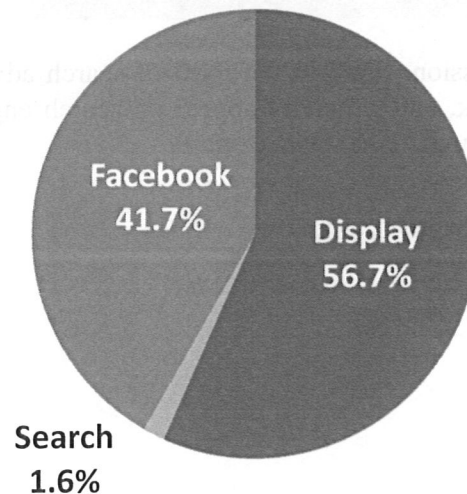
Congressional offices can use online advertising for the following types of official online activities:

- Academy Nominations
- Congressional Art Competition
- Constituent Services
- E-Communications Subscription
- Issues (as a conduit to a survey or townhall)
- Job Fairs
- Member Appearances

- Member Contact Information
- Natural Disaster Relief
- Office Internships
- Open Office Hours
- Surveys
- Tele-townhalls
- Townhalls

Four of these official online activities are allowed during the blackout period[1]: academy nominations, Congressional art competition, natural disaster relief, and office internships.

We used two metrics to analyze the advertisements' actual performance: click-through rates and conversion rates. We also evaluated them according to an online survey and two pairs of focus groups (more about that below).

The click-through rate (CTR) is measured by dividing the number of clicks on the ad by the number of ad impressions[2]. The conversion rate is measured by taking the number of conversions—in other words, the number of people who take the action suggested by the ad—and dividing it by the number of clicks.

For example, imagine a Member of Congress runs 100,000 impressions of an ad[3] saying, "Sign up for my e-newsletter," and 60 people click on it. That ad's CTR would be 0.06%. Then, if nine of those 60 subscribe, the conversion rate would be 15%.

It should be noted that not all Congressional offices in our study had tracking available for conversions, so the data on conversion rates is derived from a smaller sample.

Finally, we categorized the advertisements based on the type of official online activity it was meant for (i.e. the bullet-pointed categories listed above), and the types of calls-to-actions used in each ad. A call-to-action is an actual phrase used in the advertisements that try to entice viewers to click and become engaged.

In addition to analyzing data from FrankingGrid, we also gathered information from iConstituent and Facebook that is cited throughout the report.

Separate from analyzing hard performance data, we conducted public opinion research specifically for this project. This includes two focus groups with Independent voters in Las Vegas, NV on December 13, 2011, a national online survey of 600 registered voters on January

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[1] The period within 90 days of an election when most proactive outreach efforts to constituents are prohibited.
[2] An ad impression is one ad appearing on one web page one time.
[3] This could mean, for example, that for 5,000 constituents, each one is served an ad to view 20 times. Or 10,000 are served an ad 10 times each. The ads could appear on different websites that the constituent views.

3-5, 2012, and a second pair of focus groups with Independent voters in Raleigh, NC on January 10, 2012.

The online survey featured a "recall" exercise designed to determine how well viewers recalled seeing an online ad from a "pseudo-Member" of Congress named "Michael Adams" when compared to ads for actual commercial products. It also featured a quantitative evaluation of 16 different online display ads for Adams. Note that under House rules, a Member may not show his or her photo in the ads.

The margin of error for the survey was +/- 4.0%.

We spent considerable amounts of time in the focus groups discussing these ads and how voters view them (both as a form of Congressional outreach, as well as by individual ad). Verbatim quotes from respondents appear in the report, and are also summarized where appropriate.

# KEY FINDINGS

## A) COMPARATIVE RESULTS

1) **On a "per-impression" basis, online ads are significantly less expensive than other ways to "touch" constituents—and that lower cost allows for greater repetition. However, the cost story becomes more complex when comparing different ways to convince constituents to take an action, such as sign up for an e-newsletter, or build "likes" on Facebook**

This finding truly is a "glass-half-full vs. glass-half-empty" story. Let's start with the "glass-half-full" perspective. Without a doubt, touching a constituent through traditional outreach tools, such as direct mail, is remarkably more expensive than doing it online. Let's look at five different outreach methods, and compare the costs for four-color printed postcards, tele-townhalls, e-newsletters, and two forms of online advertising:

| | 4-color postcard[4] 5" x 8" | Tele-townhall[5] | E-newsletter[6] | Online display ad[7] | Online Facebook ad[8] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cost to identify and touch 50,000 constituents one time each with a... | $25,000 | $5,525 | $4,585 | $289 | $75 |
| Cost per constituent | $0.50 | $0.11 | $0.09 | $0.0057 | $0.0015 |

One would reasonably argue that the impact of each of these forms of outreach is different, and likely it is. For example, no one would claim that much impact can be derived by showing an online ad just a single time. However, it's also useful as a thought exercise to see how many times each form of outreach could be purchased for a particular amount of money. So, let's go back to $25,000.

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[4] Assumes outside vendor designs the four-color postcard, writes draft text, secures the mailing list, and handles printing and postage.

[5] In order to "touch" 50,000 constituents with a tele-townhall, a Congressional office needs to dial approximately 67,000 phone numbers, as only ~75% of numbers dialed result either in a live person picking up the phone, or a pre-recorded message being left on the constituent's answering machine/voicemail. This price includes $1,340 for list rental.

[6] Assumes Member has an existing account with an e-mail service provider. Using Fireside21 as an example, a Congressional office will pay a base monthly fee of $585 as well as $4,000 to buy an active email list of 50,000 constituents.

[7] This cost includes the design of the display ad, and management of the campaign, by FrankingGrid.

[8] This cost includes the design of the Facebook ad, and management of the campaign, by FrankingGrid.

For $25,000, a Congressional office could touch 50,000 constituents each with *either*:

- One postcard
- Five tele-townhalls
- Unlimited e-newsletter issues (for 32 months)[9]
- 86 display ads
- 333 Facebook ads

At this point, we don't know the relative impact of one postcard vs. 333 Facebook ads or 86 display ads. The different formats, sizes, contents, and contexts make this very hard to measure. However, there are good arguments for using all of the forms of communication cited above in order to build awareness of the Members' activities and constituent services, and for targeting them to the audiences most likely to engage with them.

For example, seniors have told us they are more likely to read "snail mail" than younger constituents are. They are more likely, also, to participate on tele-townhalls. Younger constituents are likelier to use Facebook. A smart outreach strategy would take this into consideration, as well as account for the fact that most constituents consistently say they want to hear from their Member between once per month and once per quarter.

Let's turn to the "glass-half-empty" analysis. The relative effectiveness of the different technologies can also be viewed through the prism of acquisition cost—that is, the cost of persuading a constituent to take a given action. So, for example, imagine a Member wants to convince a constituent to sign up for an e-newsletter. Three ways to pay to do that would be to send a printed mailer with a tear-off reply postcard, send an e-mail solicitation to constituents with an e-newsletter enclosed, or run online display ads encouraging constituents to subscribe by clicking on the ad.

An analysis of existing data, combined with conversations with various Congressional offices, yields the following cost-per-subscriber results:

- Mail piece with reply postcard: Assume 50,000 mailers are sent for $25,000. A generally-anticipated 1% response rate would mean 500 new subscribers at a cost of $50 per subscriber. This does not include the modest staff cost for data entry when the reply cards have to be processed by the Congressional office.

- E-mail solicitation sent to 50,000 constituents: In viewing data from Fireside21, the conversion rate for email solicitations sent to non-subscribers and designed to explicitly gain new e-newsletter subscribers (or to take a survey, which invariably leads to new subscriptions), is between 3% and 6%. This would generate an additional 1,500 to 3,000

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[9] Assumes Member works with a company such as Fireside21, where there is an initial set-up fee of $1,250 plus a monthly unlimited usage fee of $585. The cost of buying 50,000 email addresses is $4,000. The assumption for this calculation is that the Member would use this same list month after month without purchasing an updated list at some point—and that might not be the case in reality. If a new list needs to be purchased, that would reduce the funds available to pay for unlimited usage—and thereby reduce the time frame from 32 months.

subscribers at a cost of $4,585. This means the acquisition cost per subscriber ranges from approximately $1.50 to $3.00.[10]

- Online display ads: We studied the effects of 21.5 million display ad impressions that were designed to generate e-newsletter subscriptions. The average cost per each new opt-in subscriber was $51.57. While this average matches the cost of the traditional printed mailers with reply cards, the costs varied wildly. To acquire one new e-newsletter subscriber ranged from $18.75 for one Member to well into the triple digits for another.[11]

Let's look at another kind of acquisition cost—this time related to Facebook. Again, it's a "glass-half-full" vs. "glass-half-empty" situation. And the question here is, "What exactly is the Member acquiring?"

If the issue is the "cost per 'like'" (meaning the cost to run an ad to get a constituent to "like" the Member on Facebook), that can range from $3.40 on average to $13.70 on average.[12] One might say that this is the "glass half empty" part of the Facebook story, as Members might expect getting constituents to "like" them on Facebook should cost pennies at most. Yet, the "glass half full" perspective on Facebook is, naturally, totally different.

For example, the average Facebook user has 130 "friends." Every user who "likes" a Member of Congress and views his/her posts can re-post a news item, speech, etc. from the Member that those 130 friends have an opportunity to view. So, that average "cost per 'like'" of $3.40 or $13.70 cited above actually buys the Member ongoing access to each fan's group of friends for 2.6 cents to 10.5 cents each.

Furthermore, there are other metrics that Facebook uses, such as "daily reach," which is defined as the number of unique users who have seen any content associated with a Member's page. In one Member's Facebook ad campaign we analyzed from this past autumn, the average daily reach increased from 635 unique users per day during the 16 days prior to the launch of the Facebook ad campaign, up to 6,986 unique users a day in the first 16 days of that ad effort. The cost per day to run this campaign was $27.22, or less than half a cent (0.43 cents) to reach each additional unique user.

## 2) In general, Congressional advertisements perform less effectively than consumer advertisements in terms of click-through rate (CTR)

In our data sample of Congressional advertising performance, display ads had an average click-through rate of 0.064%. Search ads had an average click-through rate of 0.97%. Facebook ads

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[10] This assumes the Congressional office is already a subscriber to an email service such as Fireside21's. If not, the company's set-up fee of $1.250 would need to be amortized, and that would raise the cost of acquiring a new e-newsletter subscriber by an additional $0.83 to $1.66.

[11] This wide variation may be due to a number of factors, including differences in ad content, ad placement, and constituent perceptions of the Member. This merits more research.

[12] This difference is based on a variety of factors, such as whether the Facebook ads are bought on a "cost per click" or a "cost per impression" basis, whether they are being strategically targeted to reach particular constituent groups, how long the effort runs, and who the online ad agency is that is doing the purchasing.

had an average click-through rate 0.026%. How do these numbers compare with advertising in the commercial space, recognizing that Congressional ads and commercial ads are meant to serve different purposes?[13]

With static[14] display ads in the commercial space the average CTR is 0.09%—higher than the 0.064% in our Congressional sample. However, looking at publicly-available Google data by unique industries, the Congressional ads' CTR is comparable to the 0.07% CTR in sectors such as financial services and telecom.[15]

With search ads, publicly-available data are harder to come by. However, there is a rule of thumb in online advertising that if one's search campaign has a CTR of less than 2.0%, there is opportunity for improvement. Or, as one Google Adwords professional put it in an online posting, "…if I had started a new account as a new advertiser, I'd want to shoot for a CTR in the neighborhood of 2% - and if I were well below that, well, I'd know I had some learning and work to do."[16] By this measure, large swaths of Congressional search advertising, which has an average CTR of 0.97%, could be performing better, relative to offer-based commercial advertising.

With Facebook, the average CTR in 2010 as reported by Webtrends (a Portland, OR-based firm specializing in social and mobile marketing) was 0.051%.[17] This data looked at 11,200 different ads containing 4.5 billion ad impressions. Our Congressional sample's Facebook CTR, at 0.026%, was significantly lower than this average. However, it was nearly identical to four industry categories in the Webtrends report: telecommunications, grocery stores, conferences and events, and financial services. And it was far above the CTRs of two other categories: healthcare (0.011%) and internet and software (0.021%).

A second vendor that sells Facebook advertising to Congressional offices claims an average CTR of 0.054%, which is directly in line with the Webtrends data.[18]

While it's difficult to know exactly why Congressional online advertising, on balance, seems to underperform commercial online advertising, there are a variety of factors that could be the cause. These range from varying goals (profit maximization for companies vs. awareness-building for Members), to perhaps lower levels of interest in politics compared to certain commercial pursuits.

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[13] Typically ads in the commercial space have very strong offer and call to action in order to sell a product.

[14] meaning those ads without flash or video

[15] http://www.google.com/adwords/watchthisspace/tools/click-through-rates/#graph-4

[16] http://www.google.com/support/forum/p/AdWords/thread?tid=7aeb3290fd8feccb&hl=en

[17] http://blogs.webtrends.com/wp-includes/ms-files.php?file=2011/01/webtrends_facebook_advertising_performance.pdf

[18] This difference between vendors is based on a variety of factors, such as whether the Facebook ads are bought on a "cost per click" or a "cost per impression" basis, whether they are being strategically targeted to reach particular constituent groups, how long the effort runs, and who the online ad agency is that is doing the purchasing.

## B) DISPLAY ADS

1) **Display ads reflect most positively on Members when they focus on offering help to constituents with services that matter to them and their families, and when they solicit constituent feedback. The ads with the least positive impact are those that promote the Member's presence on Twitter, or offer help with constituent services that matter to only a small percentage of constituents.**

There are many different types of constituent services, so there are—unsurprisingly—many different types of display ads run by Members. One key research question is whether these ads all generate the same type of goodwill among constituents, or whether there's a big difference between some and others. Our research suggests the latter is true.

Our January 2012 online survey of 600 adults included an exercise where respondents were instructed as follows:

> "For the next set of questions, please imagine that your Congressman is a man named Michael Adams. You're going to see a total of eight Internet ads that resemble the types of ads that a Congressman Adams might run on websites you visit.
>
> To make these ads easier to read, you will see them enlarged on your screen. In reality, they would be the size of the ads you viewed at the beginning of this survey [meaning they would be "normal" size]. You will view these upcoming ads one at a time. After you view each one, you will be asked one question. For the sake of this exercise, please imagine that any locations referenced in these ads are located in your Congressional district."

Respondents were each randomly shown eight ads out of a pool of 16. We showed[19] these specific ads because in the FrankingGrid database, they were the one (or ones) in each category of allowable online advertising to have the highest click-through rates in reality.[20] We interpreted the high click-through rates as evidence that these ads were of more interest to viewers than others in the category.

After viewing each ad, each respondent was asked the following question: "On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being very negative, and 10 being very positive, how does this ad make you feel about Michael Adams?"

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[19] All of these were the exact same size (300 x 250), and were displayed by themselves on an otherwise blank screen.

[20] We slightly altered these ads from the versions run by actual Members so that they appeared as ads from pseudo-Congressman Michael Adams.

The following are the results of that research, as well as commentary about each ad from our focus group respondents in Las Vegas and Raleigh:

(NOTE: These ads were converted to black and white for the purpose of printing this report. All respondents in the survey and focus groups viewed them in color.)

These are the ads in *descending* order of effectiveness in terms of generating positive feelings about Michael Adams among online survey respondents:



**You're invited!**
REPRESENTATIVE
**Michael Adams**
is holding a
**FREE Job Fair**
Thu, January 19th
6:30PM
**Sign Up Now**

**Score**
7.08

**Best Demographics**
Ages 18-29 (7.58)
Income Under $50K (7.44)
HS Education (7.36)

This ad scored the highest in our poll in large part because it addresses a concern about employment that so many Americans have. Yet, when we discussed it with our focus group participants, many had questions about it and suggestions on how to improve it. For example, without further information about the job fair (i.e. who the participating employers are), and reassurance that Michael Adams would be there in person, focus group participants were not convinced that he would be able to help them find a job. Some questioned a Congressman's role in sponsoring a job fair because he has no jobs to offer. Some respondents interpreted the outstretched hand as a suggestion that the job fair is essentially a political and self-promotional event for Adams. Many seniors in the focus groups rated this ad low because the issue of unemployment is not directly relevant to them.

To improve the ad, respondents suggested showing the names of the co-sponsors/employers in the ad, listing specific types of jobs, shrinking the size of the Congressman's name to reduce the impression of self-promotion, removing the word "free" (since job fairs usually are free already), reducing the number of colors used, changing the word "holding" to "hosting" (to imply Adams will be there in person), and saying that Michael Adams cares about reducing unemployment.
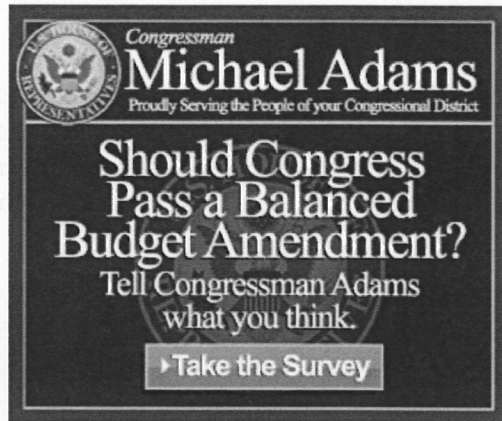
**Score**
6.94

**Best Demographics**
Ages 60+ (7.37)
Income $100K+ (7.22)

This ad was well-received by our respondents. They thought the ad conveyed that the Congressman was, as one respondent said, "concerned about his constituents' feelings and ideas on the budget," and he was taking a proactive position by reaching out. They felt that he as "willing to listen" and didn't feel that the ad had an agenda attached to it.

> *"He can't go door-to-door meeting everyone, so this is how modern politicians do it. He's saying, 'I want to get involved. Why don't you get involved with me?'" – Thomas, Older Independent, Las Vegas*

A Raleigh senior, Ellen, pointed out the small tagline below the Congressman's name in the ad, saying that, "It just lends to the fact that he takes pride in representing us and what we are thinking."
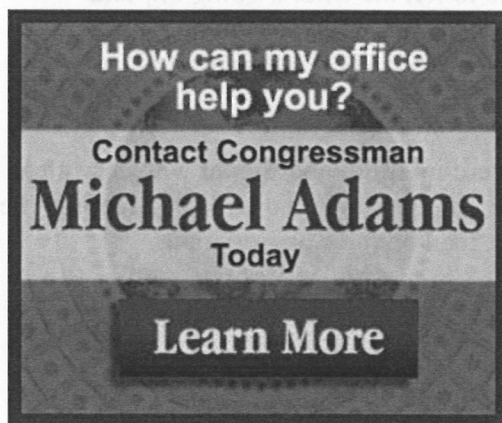


**Score**
6.89

**Best Demographics**
HS Education (7.22)
Income $100K+ (7.17)
Female (7.14)

This ad received positive feedback from senior respondents for its short and simple message of reaching out to the whole population. Adams's desire for input from constituents seemed genuine. However, many respondents reacted negatively to this ad. They mentioned that the "learn more" button suggests a lot of uninteresting reading that would follow clicking on that button, and it makes the message less straightforward. Also, some were skeptical that they

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would receive help if they were to contact Congressman Adams.

To improve the ad, respondents suggested replacing "learn more" with "click here" or "contact," and making the central idea of the ad, "How can my office help you?" by making that text stand out more. Also, respondents suggested putting an e-mail address or a phone number to the Congressman's office in the ad rather than having the reader click on the ad to "Learn More."



**CONGRESSMAN**
# Michael Adams
is hosting a
## Town Hall Meeting
Thursday,
January 19th at 6:30PM

**RSVP**

**Score**
6.79

**Best Demographics**
Income $100K+ (7.11)
Ages 18-29 (7.06)

Respondents liked this ad, with one stating, "This is what the Congressman should be doing." The ad told our respondents that he is interested in hearing from his constituents and is making an effort to meet people face-to-face. The ad also made our respondents feel like there was no agenda, and that the Congressman was inviting them to a discussion.

> *"I gave it a 10. He's already our Congressman, he's not trying to get my vote, but he's coming to me to tell me what's going on, and taking time out of his schedule to come out to my territory. To me, that's someone I elected telling me he cares." – Cherry, Older Independent, Las Vegas*

Aesthetically, respondents also said the colors were inviting, and the ad was very clean cut and easy to read. Joe, another Independent, liked the emphasis on "Town Hall Meeting" because it placed more importance on the community, rather than on the Congressman.

**Score**
6.74

**Best Demographics**
Ages 60+ (7.09)

*Note: All text is white except for "Michael" and "January 19ᵗʰ, 2012," which are in red. The background is blue.*

Respondents said that this ad made them feel good about Michael Adams, since it targets a broad group that needs help and does not always get the benefits they deserve. The ad addresses the Congressman's concern about the issue and his willingness to help by saying he will host the fair. One respondent liked that it is being held at a community college because it will make the experience more personable. Others said that Michael Adams's name appearing so large makes it look like a political ad, focusing on himself first and veterans second.

They suggested that this ad could be improved by highlighting the information about the fair and veterans, reducing the size of the Congressman's name, and directing a short message to veterans thanking them for their service.
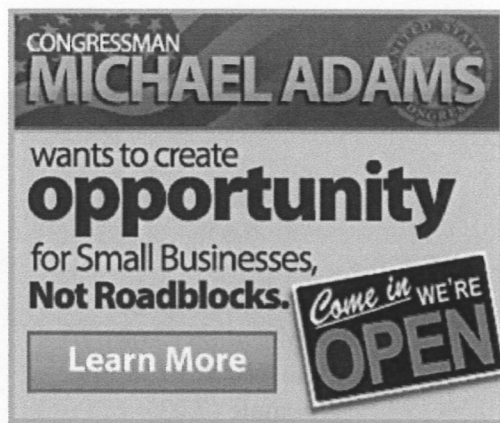


**Score**
6.69
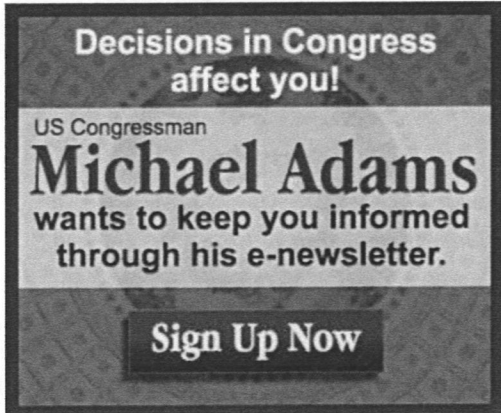
**Best Demographics**
Ages 18-29 (7.31)
HS Education (7.20)
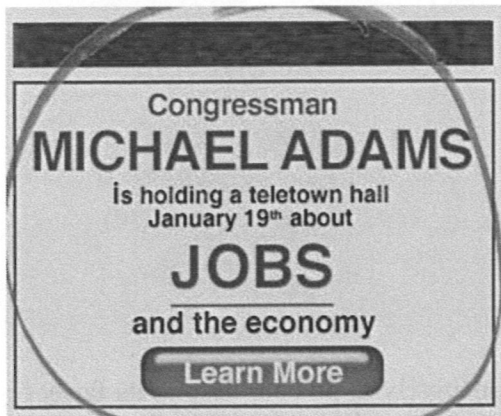
Many focus group respondents did not respond positively to this ad, despite its fairly high score in the survey. They thought that the message was not communicated effectively. Some respondents were not comfortable with the wording, especially the word "wants," which left doubts that his efforts would actually be helpful. Also, the phrase "Not Roadblocks" felt like a political attack. Others liked that Congressman Adams recognizes that small businesses do have

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roadblocks and he will work to remove them, which will help communities recover from this long recession.

Respondents believed that this ad could be improved by being more specific about how opportunity would be created for small businesses.

**Decisions in Congress affect you!**

US Congressman
**Michael Adams**
wants to keep you informed through his e-newsletter.

**Sign Up Now**

Score
6.69

**Best Demographics**
Ages 45-59 (6.94)

Overall, respondents responded positively to this ad. They liked that the ad shows the Congressman's efforts to involve them in decision-making, and they spoke positively about the text: "Decisions in Congress affect you!" Others liked being able to read about his views on issues and saving money on postage by receiving his newsletter online. Some pointed out that those without a computer and access to the Internet would not be able to benefit from an e-newsletter. Some respondents pointed out that the wording "wants to keep you informed" is too authoritative and recommended softening it by saying "stay informed" or "would like to keep you informed."

Congressman
**MICHAEL ADAMS**
is holding a teletown hall
January 19th about
**JOBS**
and the economy
**Learn More**

Score
6.63

**Best Demographics**
HS Education (7.08)
Income $100K+ (7.06)
Female (7.03)

Respondents were critical of this ad because of its informal look, perhaps in part because they did not see it in the context of a web page. They were also skeptical that holding a tele-townhall would provide any practical help because there would be conversation, but not necessarily any actions taken to help them find employment.

Respondents suggested making this a physical townhall meeting rather than a tele-townhall meeting, since they would want to speak with Congressman Adams face to face. They also suggested adding color to it and reducing the size of the Congressman's name.



Score
6.26

Best Demographics
Ages 18-29 (6.68)
Female (6.63)
Grad Education (6.57)

*Note: All text is white except for "Adams," which is in red.*
*The background is blue.*

Respondents scored this ad fairly low because it did not apply to them, and they were not looking for an internship. Most felt that it was "too specific" and targeted to "a very small number of people." A younger male respondent added, "I'm more interested in what you can do for the masses, not what you can do for one person."

Bill, a senior, didn't like the ad because the Congressman "is only going to hire one or two people. He is using [the ad] merely to get his name in front of you. He is not going to help anyone do anything."



Score
6.24

Best Demographics
Ages 60+ (6.68)
Income $100K+ (6.65)

Some respondents liked this ad's message because it offered a way to directly contact the Congressman and "opened the lines of communication" between the Congressman and his constituents. Many also liked that they could participate in flash polls as a means to express their

opinion on different topics. Some suggested that the ad would be more effective if it listed the Congressman's phone number as well.

Although the respondents reacted positively to the message the ad was trying to convey, they did not like the design of the ad, calling it "awfully bland looking" and that it looked like "the worst PowerPoint [slide] ever."
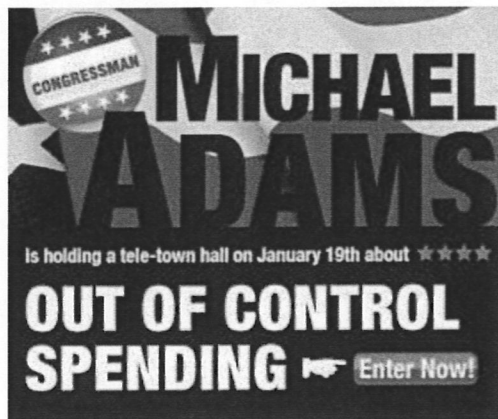


**Score**
6.05

**Best Demographics**
HS Education (6.56)
Income Under $50K (6.32)

Respondents said the ad sounded like a "sound bite" to them. Some respondents liked the graphics, but the large font size of "Michael Adams" and "Out of Control Spending" made them do a double-take to make sure that the Congressman was not supporting out of control spending.

Some of the respondents did not even notice that the ad was to promote a tele-townhall. And most were unsure as to what a tele-townhall is, with only a few out of all four groups having ever participated on one.
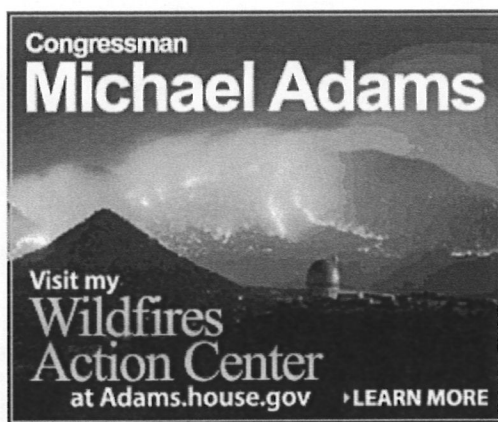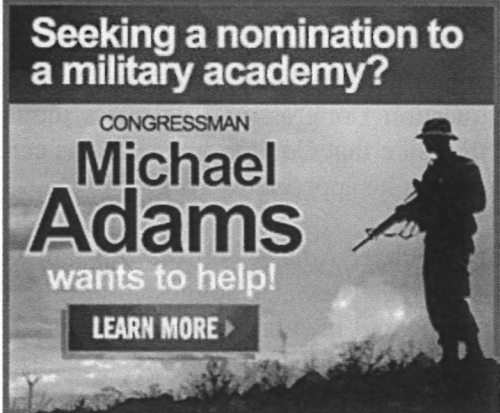


**Score**
5.88

**Best Demographics**
Grad School Education (6.36)

The Wildfires Action Center ad was one of the worst-received ads among our focus group respondents. Most thought that it was too geographically specific, and "didn't apply to them." They also found the picture to be too negative. Our respondents told us that they would have

preferred a picture of firefighters putting out a fire or Smokey the Bear—not a reminder of the disaster occurring within their community.

A number of respondents also felt that the ad was too self-serving, and was being used more as a means of promoting the Congressman than helping his constituents in a crisis. Rich, an Independent senior, said that the ad "gave me the feeling that he threw something together really quickly to get his name in front of people." Respondents suggested that the ad should direct people to official disaster websites, such as FEMA and the Red Cross, instead of the Congressman's website.



**Score**
5.67

**Best Demographics**
Ages 18-29 (5.95)
HS Education (5.92)

This ad was the lowest-scoring ad out of all 16 we tested in both Raleigh groups (we didn't ask about this ad in Las Vegas). Our focus group respondents felt that the ad was too specific, focused on too small a constituency, and was targeted at "16 year olds who play *Call of Duty* 18 hours a day," as one younger Independent said. It also garnered negative reactions because they did not like the image of a soldier with a gun. They felt that having the soldier was a "scary thing" and that there was a "feeling of war" from the ad.

Respondents compared this ad to the Air Force Academy ad (shown below), which they liked better. Ellen said that the Air Force Academy ad suggests a "what can I do to help you" feeling, whereas this military academy ad says "let me tell you what I can do for you."

**Score**
5.60

**Best Demographics**
Ages 18-29 (6.62)
Grad School Education (6.14)
Income $100K+ (6.00)
Ages 30-44 (5.99)
Female (5.86)
Income $50K-$99K (5.85)

Most respondents criticized this ad for narrowly targeting a very small group and considered the message frivolous. One respondent would even question Congressman Adams's judgment for running such an ad. Those who liked the ad said they like that Congressman Adams cares about young people and what inspires them, and they liked that he appreciates art.

Respondents suggested reducing the huge text of "Michael Adams" on the top half of the ad because it makes him seem insincere and self-promotional. They also suggested putting the topic of the ad at the top instead of the Congressman's name and having high schools make students aware of this opportunity rather than Members of Congress.
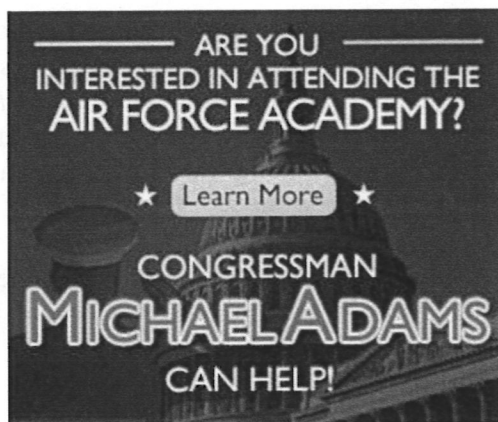


**Score**
5.59

**Best Demographics**
Ages 18-29 (6.25)
Ages 30-44 (5.89)

Unlike our online survey respondents, our focus group respondents viewed this ad more favorably than the military academy ad shown above, mainly because this ad does not visually portray an image of war and thus makes the message appear more neutral. Some respondents also preferred the wording of this ad rather than using the word "nomination," which appears in the military academy ad. However, focus group participants generally rated this ad low because of its narrow focus. Also, some respondents believed that anyone interested in attending the academy would already know everything they need to know about how to get accepted.
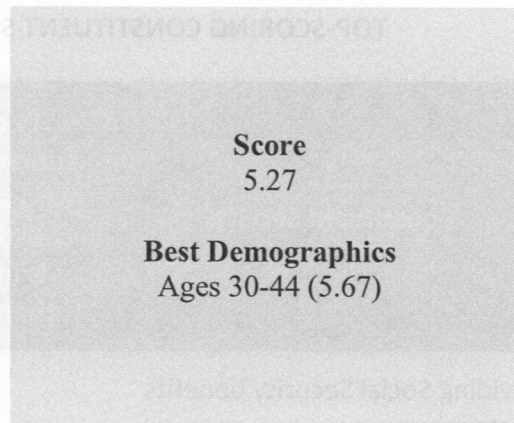
The Twitter ad was not well-received by our focus group participants. Most respondents found Twitter "too limiting" and "cut out [those who do not use Twitter.]" One senior told us, "I don't take Twitter seriously. It's like the newspaper at checkout, the *National Enquirer.*"

For many of our respondents, they regard Twitter as a "waste of time and resources." We heard multiple people tell us that "if the Congressman is sending out tweets, he is not doing his job."

One suggestion that the respondents liked was to include additional forms of social media in the ad, such as Facebook and Youtube. Deanna, an Independent from the younger Raleigh group, said that if the ad promoted different outreach tools, "you would get the impression that he is reaching out in a number of different ways. Because [the ad] is limited to Twitter, it's off-putting." Another suggestion is to make sure the ad does not use the word "Representative," but rather "Congressman," as "Representative" suggests that Michael Adams could be a representative of Twitter and not of his constituents.

If Members want additional clues as to the kinds of services that matter most and least to constituents, they should consider these next two lists, which show from our survey results the constituent services that our survey respondents rated (or chose not to rate) as most important to them personally. Respondents were shown a list of 19 constituent services provided by Congressional offices, and could check off as important as many as they deemed appropriate. We found:

**TOP-SCORING CONSTITUENT SERVICES (in descending order):**

| Constituent service | Percentage of survey respondents who agree that this constituent service is important to them personally | Particular demographic groups where a higher-than-average percentage of respondents score this constituent service as important to them personally |
|---|---|---|
| Providing Social Security benefits assistance | 57.8% | Ages 60+ (75.2%), HS Education (69.4%), and Income Under $50K (67.5%) |
| Providing Medicare benefits assistance | 51.2% | Ages 60+ (68.8%), Income Under $50K (60.4%), and HS Education (59.7%) |
| Providing veterans' benefits assistance | 47.5% | Ages 60+ (60.3%), Income Under $50K (53.6%), and HS Education (52.4%) |
| Providing unemployment benefits assistance | 45.2% | HS Education (50.8%), Ages 18-29 (50.7%), and Income Under $50K (50.6%) |
| Providing information about local job fairs in order to assist job-seekers | 42.8% | Females (49.5%) and ages 18-29 (49.3%) |
| Providing assistance with local food banks | 41.3% | Income Under $50K (49.4%) and HS Education (44.4%) |
| Providing Medicaid benefits assistance | 41.2% | HS Education (57.3%), Income Under $50K (49.7%), and ages 45-59 (45.9%) |

**BOTTOM-SCORING CONSTITUENT SERVICES (in ascending order):**

| Constituent service | Percentage of survey respondents who agree that this constituent service is important to them personally | Particular demographic groups where a *lower-than-average* percentage of respondents score this constituent service as important to them personally |
|---|---|---|
| Providing information about how to get a flag that was flown over the U.S. Capitol | 8.0% | Ages 60+ (3.5%), Graduate Education (4.7%), and females (6.3%) |
| Providing information about how to get a Presidential greeting or Congressional acknowledgment for an organization | 8.3% | Ages 60+ (2.8%) and Income $50K-$99K (6.5%) |
| Providing information regarding visiting the U.S. Capitol and getting a Congressional tour | 12.5% | Ages 60+ (7.1%), females (10.4%), and HS Education (10.5%) |
| Providing military academy nominations | 13.8% | HS Education (8.1%) and ages 60+ (12.1%) |
| Providing immigration assistance | 14.2% | HS Education (10.5%) and ages 60+ (10.6%) |
| Providing applications for internships in Washington, DC for students in your community | 15.5% | HS Education (12.9%) |

The huge take-away here is that for the two top-scoring constituent services, providing assistance with Social Security and Medicare benefits, Members have run virtually no advertising to date. And a considerable amount of advertising has been run to promote services that matter very little to most constituents.

2) **Prior to viewing online display ads from a Member of Congress, constituents are skeptical of their value. After viewing them, their perceptions improve markedly**

In our online survey, prior to showing each respondent eight display ads (randomly chosen out of a pool of 16), we asked the respondents:

"A Member of Congress is allowed to use his or her official office budget to reach out to constituents using various forms of communication. One new way to reach out is to run online ads to alert constituents to upcoming events, to keep them

informed about what is happening in Washington, to invite them to take an online survey to solicit their feedback on policy issues, to give them an opportunity to subscribe to the Member's e-newsletter, and to offer a variety of constituent services, such as navigating Washington bureaucracies like the Veteran's Administration or Medicare. Members of Congress are NOT allowed to use their House budgets to run election campaign ads of any kind, and there can be no photos of the Congressman in any of the ads. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much would you approve of having your Congressman use taxpayer dollars to run online ads such as these? One means you'd completely disapprove, and 10 means you'd completely approve."

The mean score for this question was 3.72, meaning that in the abstract, respondents were negative about running these ads. Only 39.5% were neutral or positive, meaning they scored this question at a five or higher.

After viewing eight randomly-selected ads, respondents were then asked this question:

"You have now viewed and rated a variety of ads run by imaginary Congressman Michael Adams. Now let's focus on your actual Congressman. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much would you approve of having your actual, real-life Congressman use taxpayer dollars to run online ads that would resemble the Michael Adams ads you just saw? One means you'd completely disapprove of having your Congressman run these kinds of ads, and 10 means you'd completely approve."

The mean score for this question was 4.96. And a majority, 58.6%, were neutral or positive at a score of five or higher.

To better understand initial, uninformed perceptions of display ads and how these views shifted after seeing the ads, we explored this topic in our focus groups.

Prior to showing the display ads, and then afterwards, we asked the following question:

"On a scale from zero to 10, how strongly do you support or oppose having your Member of Congress use official funds to run advertising on websites you visit?"

All four groups scored this question between 2.9 and 4.0 initially, meaning they fairly strongly oppose the use of official funds for online advertising. Many respondents said they were confused by the word "advertising," and thought that the Member of Congress was using official funds to campaign against his or her opponents. We also heard these reasons why people opposed Members of Congress using official funds to run advertising on websites: it's presumptuous for them to assume everyone has a computer; they should send out mail instead; the participants ignore or avoid ads; funds spent on ads should be put towards a better use, such as helping solve the financial mess we're in; and online advertising is ineffective.

*"I want my Congressperson to be more involved with me and my town personally. I don't want to go on the web to see what they're*

*doing, spending my money to tell me. I'd rather they brought themselves to my town and tell me in a meeting or forum. I feel like I'm left out in the cold most of the time." – Cherry, Older Independent, Las Vegas*

From those who support this type of advertising, we heard that it's effective because so many people are online now, and it's good for environmental reasons (no paper usage). These respondents liked the idea that the Member is trying to do things for them, that he or she is reaching out to people who may not already be engaged, and they believe online advertising is fine if it's about an issue that's important to their district.

*"It's one way for me to understand what's going on. The funds are put aside after they're elected for advertising, and I don't mind them advertising on the web. It's fine." – Sharon, Older Independent, Las Vegas*

*"I'm online a lot, so that would be one way for a representative to get my attention and make me aware. It's one more way of getting the name and news out there, so I see no reason not to use public money on that." – Julie, Older Independent, Raleigh*

After seeing the series of display ads, three of the groups scored the question 0.7 to 1.7 points higher than initially, while the younger Independents in Raleigh scored it 0.2 points lower. We had a discussion with this group about why seeing the ads did not shift their opinion in a positive direction. They seemed to be generally against any advertising on the web, and would prefer to attend a townhall meeting instead of having online interactions with their Member of Congress. Some participants did not understand that online advertising may be the only way to notify some constituents that the townhall meeting is occurring.

3) **Display ads related to natural disaster relief, constituent services, and Members' contact information garner high click-through rates; e-newsletter and survey ads garner high conversion rates**

There are two leading behavior-tracking metrics to analyze the success of online advertising: the click-through rate (the number of clicks divided by number of impressions) and the conversion rate (the number of conversions divided by number of clicks). The following are the display ad click-through rates for various types of official online activities:

| Types of Display Ads | Click Through Rate |
|---|---|
| Natural Disaster Relief | 0.109% |
| Constituent Services | 0.093% |
| Member's Contact Info | 0.090% |
| Academy Nomination | 0.079% |
| Job Fair | 0.075% |
| Member Appearances | 0.069% |
| E-Newsletter | 0.066% |
| Average for Total | 0.064% |
| Townhall | 0.062% |
| Congressional Art Competition | 0.060% |
| Office Internship | 0.059% |
| Survey | 0.057% |
| Tele-townhall | 0.057% |
| Issue | 0.031% |

The following are the conversion rates for display ads based on official online activity, where applicable:

| Types of Display Ads | Conversion Rate |
|---|---|
| Survey | 24.29% |
| E-Newsletter | 9.07% |
| Average for Total | 5.86% |
| Townhall | 2.34% |
| Tele-townhall | 2.10% |
| Job Fair | 2.09% |
| Member Appearances | 0.92% |

Survey ads, by far, had the highest conversion rate, with 24.29%. When looking at specific survey advertisements, there are usually a variety of "calls-to-action" used to get viewers to respond. However, in our sample, "take the survey" was the only call-to-action used for survey-focused advertising, and therefore had a conversion rate of 24.29%. Survey-specific ads worked best[21] on websites where there were mentions of the balanced budget amendment (40.45%), and on sites providing conservative news (35.68%) and political news (28.19%).

The following is a graphical representation of the click-through rates and conversion rates of display ads related to various official online activities:

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[21] i.e., had the highest conversion rates

# Display Ads: Official Online Activities
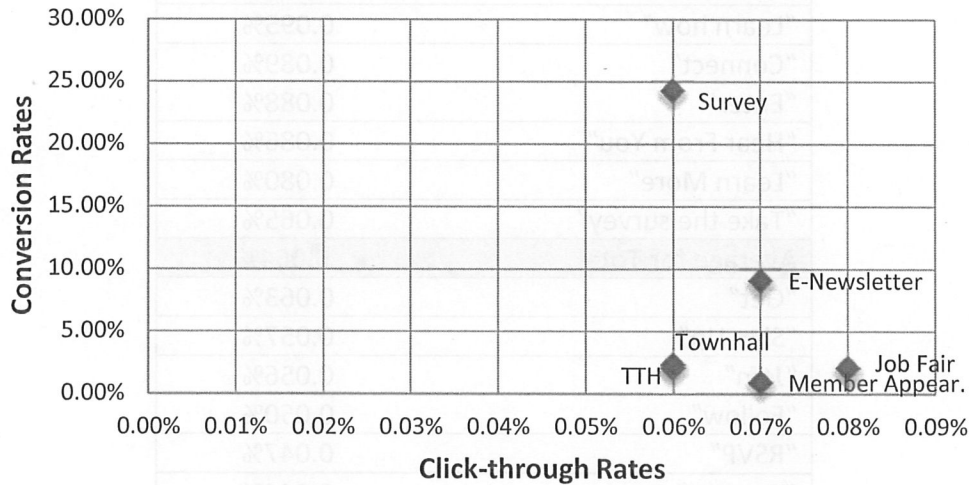


**4)** Use the "apply" call-to-action to generate the best click-through rate for display ads; "take the survey" will get Congressional offices the best conversion rate

In reviewing display ads run by Congressional offices, there are a variety of calls-to-action that Members have used—and as it turns out, with varying degrees of effectiveness. The following are two measurements of the effectiveness of calls-to-action for display ads. The first is based on click-through rates:

| Display Ads Types of Calls-to-Action | Click Through Rate |
|---|---|
| "Apply" | 0.121% |
| "Click Here" | 0.103% |
| "Learn how" | 0.095% |
| "Connect" | 0.089% |
| "Enter" | 0.088% |
| "Hear From You" | 0.086% |
| "Learn More" | 0.080% |
| "Take the survey" | 0.065% |
| **Average for Total** | **0.064%** |
| "Get" | 0.063% |
| "Sign Up" | 0.057% |
| "Join" | 0.056% |
| "Follow" | 0.050% |
| "RSVP" | 0.047% |
| "Contact" | 0.044% |
| **None** | 0.035% |
| "Keep In Touch" | 0.033% |
| "Make" | 0.023% |
| "Wants to" | 0.013% |

"Apply" is the best *call-to-action*, with a click-through rate of 0.12%. This call-to action worked best on social media and news outlet sites (0.15% and 0.12%, respectively).

The following are the best and worst calls-to-action for display ads, based on their conversion rates (where applicable):

| Display Ads Types of Calls-to-Action | Conversion Rate |
|---|---|
| "Take the survey" | 24.29% |
| "Sign Up" | 7.16% |
| **Average for Total** | **5.86%** |
| "Get" | 2.75% |
| "Hear From You" | 1.99% |
| "Learn More" | 1.65% |
| "Keep In Touch" | 1.59% |
| "Click Here" | 1.36% |
| "Join" | 1.27% |
| "RSVP" | 0.73% |
| "Follow" | 0.52% |

"Take the survey" is the best call-to-action for display ads in terms of the conversion rate, with a rate of 24.29%.

The following is a graphical representation of the click-through rates and conversion rates of calls-to-action for display ads that had 50,000 impressions or greater:

## Display Ads: Calls-to-Action
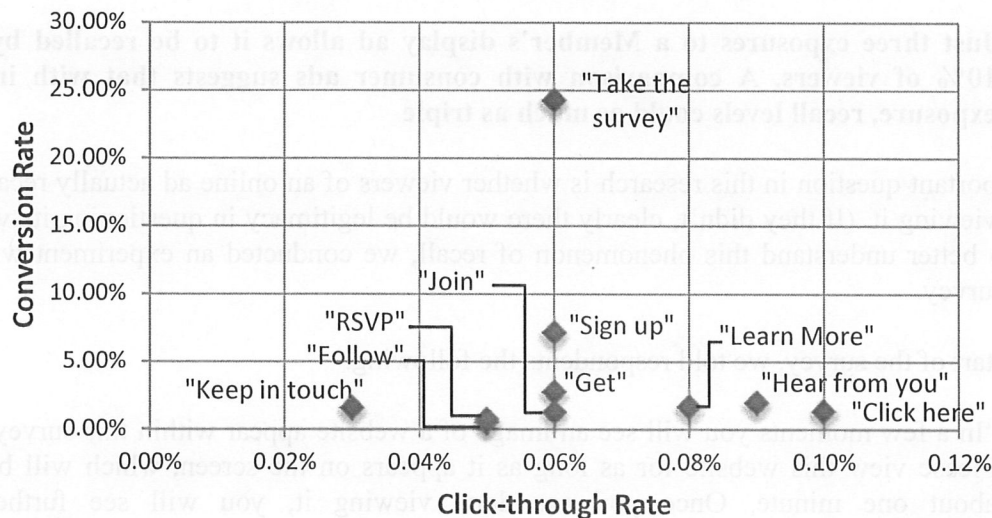


Importantly, while these findings suggest various calls to action are more effective than others, it could be that the cause is related to more than just the call to action. Further "A/B" testing is required to isolate the effectiveness of a simple word change in an otherwise identical ad.

### 5) Ads that are 300 x 250 pixels in size and shape receive the highest click-through rates as well as the highest conversion rates

As cited above, there are two leading ways to analyze the success of online advertising based on viewer behavior: the click-through rate (number of clicks divided by number of impressions) and the conversion rate (number of conversions divided by number of clicks). The following is a table of the most common types of display ad sizes (based on numbers of impressions served), along with the average click-through rate and conversion rate for each:

| Display Ad Size (By Pixels) | Click-Through Rate | Conversion Rate |
|---|---|---|
| 160 x 600 | 0.06% | 6.08% |
| 300 x 250 | 0.09% | 6.75% |
| 728 x 90 | 0.08% | 6.16% |

It should be noted that in terms of on-screen area, 160 x 600 is the largest, followed by 300 x 250, with 728 x 90 being the smallest. Taking these facts into account, there is no clear correlation between the shape or size of an ad, and the success of the advertisement.

As a best practice, Members are advised to create ads of multiple sizes (not just 300 x 250) in order to maximize the reach of their campaigns, as some sites accept ads of one size but not others.

6) **Just three exposures to a Member's display ad allows it to be recalled by nearly 10% of viewers. A comparison with consumer ads suggests that with increased exposure, recall levels could as much as triple**

One important question in this research is whether viewers of an online ad actually recall seeing it after viewing it. (If they didn't, clearly there would be legitimacy in questioning its value.) In order to better understand this phenomenon of recall, we conducted an experiment within our online survey.

At the start of the survey, we told respondents the following:

> "In a few moments you will see an image of a website appear within this survey. Please view this website for as long as it appears on the screen, which will be about one minute. Once you are done viewing it, you will see further instructions."

We then displayed the home page of a generic-looking news site, one that resembles the homepage of any local news organization. Within that page we rotated five different 300 x 250 display ads, showing actual ads for Honda, Dell, Disney, American Greetings, and an ad for pseudo-Congressman Michael Adams. Respondents saw each ad three times over the course of one minute (four seconds per impression), and the ad sequence was rotated so that 20% of respondents saw the Adams ad first in the rotation of five ads, 20% saw it second, etc.

This ad was based on one used by an actual Member; we merely changed the Congressman's name to Adams. The text-only Adams ad read as follows:

> "Congressman Michael Adams is holding a Tele-townhall on January 19th discussing Cutting Spending & Creating Jobs. Learn More."

After showing the anonymous news site's homepage for one minute, the survey then proceeded and asked respondents two demographic questions about their gender and level of educational attainment. This was done deliberately, to temporarily distract respondents, and thus make it somewhat more difficult for them to recall what they had seen. Then, the survey returned to the topic of the ads on the news site, and we asked the following:

> "Thinking back to the website you viewed a few moments ago, please type into the spaces below as many of the online ads as you recall seeing. The order does

not matter. We are looking to determine WHICH specific ads you recall, NOT the number of ads you recall. If you don't recall specifically what a particular ad was promoting, just put down anything you might remember about that ad."

We tallied the results and found 347 respondents, or 57.8%, recalled none of the ads, or incorrectly identified the ads. Of the remaining 253 respondents who correctly recalled seeing at least one ad, these are the ads they recalled, and how many respondents recalled them:
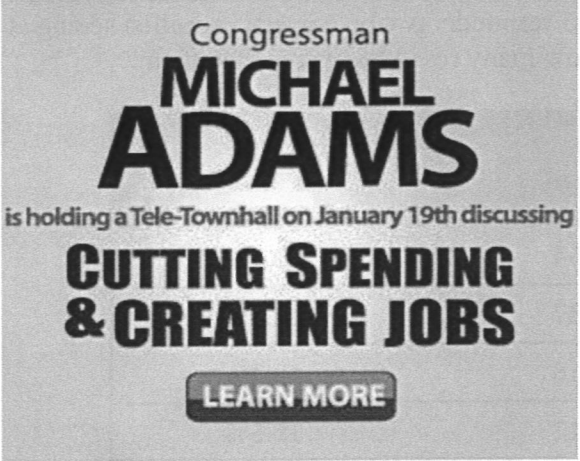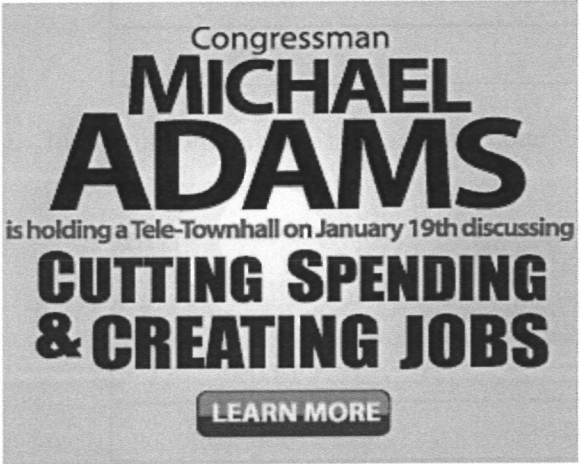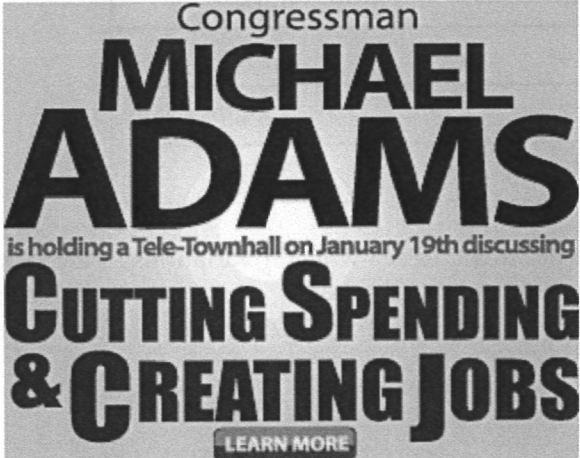
| Name of Advertiser | Number of respondents who recalled the ad | Percentage of respondents who recalled the ad[22] |
|---|---|---|
| Disney | 154 | 25.7% |
| Dell | 137 | 22.8% |
| Honda | 118 | 19.7% |
| American Greetings | 111 | 18.5% |
| Congressman Adams | 55 | 9.2% |
| None/Incorrect | 347 | 57.8% |

We then wanted to see which ad was "top of mind," and calculated for each ad the number of people who recalled it first on their list:

| Name of Advertiser | Number of respondents who recalled this ad first | Percentage of respondents who recalled this ad first |
|---|---|---|
| Disney | 78 | 13.0% |
| Dell | 61 | 10.2% |
| Honda | 51 | 8.5% |
| American Greetings | 34 | 5.7% |
| Congressman Adams | 17 | 2.8% |
| None/Incorrect | 359 | 59.8% |

Finally, we conducted an experiment within the experiment, to see whether variations in the type face size when mentioning Congressman Adams mattered at all when it comes to recall. Each respondent saw either a small, medium, or large font version of the Adams ad. Here are the results for the three ads:

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[22] This does not add up to 100% because respondents were asked to recall as many ads as possible, not just one.

| Image: Different Font Sizes | Number of respondents who recalled the ad at this font size | Percentage of respondents who recalled the ad at this font size |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 19 of 200 | 9.5% |
|  | 14 of 200 | 7.0% |
|  | 22 of 200 | 11.0% |

These results suggest that perhaps the large font is best-recalled, but the differences between the ads are fairly modest. Furthermore, respondents in the focus groups repeatedly complained about how Adams was guilty of shameless self-promotion when he inflated the font size of his name in the ads.

On this topic we heard the following in the focus groups when we asked respondents to evaluate particular ads:

> *"It seems like [with] a lot of these ads [and the size of] the name, it's a political ad as opposed to 'Here, I'm your Congressman and I'm here to help you," simply because the name is so large and up in your face." – John, Younger Independent, Raleigh*

> *"Again, it's the positioning of his name. I have a problem with all of these ads that it's all about Michael Adams. If it were positioned differently, and 'Michael Adams' were at the bottom as the sponsor, then to me it would be more inviting…. Stop putting your name in the middle of everything. We've got it. We know who you are at this point." – Pam, Younger Independent, Raleigh*

### 7) The average cost to acquire a new e-newsletter subscriber with display ads is $51.57

We looked at display ads focused on signing up constituents for Members' e-newsletters, and performed an analysis to determine the average cost to acquire one new e-newsletter subscriber. This question is important because an e-newsletter subscriber can receive e-newsletters during the "blackout" period leading up to an election.

The display ads promoting e-newsletter subscriptions appeared as a total of more than 21.5 million ad impressions. As a result, there were more than 22,500 clicks on those ads, and these resulted in nearly 2,500 conversions (i.e. new opt-in subscribers).

We calculated the average cost for each new opt-in subscriber was $51.57. While this average might seem steep, the costs to acquire one new e-newsletter opt-in ranged from $18.75 to $445.40. We analyzed each Member's landing page to see whether we could explain this enormous range. (In other words, were some sign-up processes so complex or lengthy that it would deter someone from signing up?) We could not find any correlation between the length or complexity of the sign-up form and the time it took to complete with the cost per new subscriber.

## C) SEARCH ADS

Search ads provide a useful tool to Congressional offices to help them increase the chances that individuals searching on the web will locate the constituent resources the offices provide. Search ads are text-based ads, they include a hyperlink, and generally appear on search engines such as Google or Yahoo. Typically, offices set a maximum amount of money they are willing to spend per day on search ads, typically in the range of $20 to $100 per day. Based upon a variety of factors, the prices to run search ads will vary in response a bidding process that determines the position of the Member's ad on a search results page.

Our research uncovered the following with regard to search ads:

1) **Respondents do not hold a uniform view of the value of their Congressman's running search ads on sites such as Google or Yahoo**

We showed all respondents in our focus groups examples of Congressional search ads and explained how they are used. Respondents generally have a wide variety of feelings about Members' running such ads.

The older Las Vegas group generally does not believe that search ads are effective. Some respondents said that they ignore search ads and are annoyed by them. There appears to be some confusion about how a search ad about Michael Adams would come to appear on a constituent's computer. However, one respondent did point out that a search ad about Michael Adams would only appear if someone were to search online for a topic related to him.

For those in the older Raleigh group who support Members' using the search ads, they told us that they like going directly to a source of information that they are looking for. Also, to them, it does not seem like self-promotion. One respondent told us she is not sure if it is OK to run search ads, but they are effective.

For those who do not like the idea of running such ads, we heard that everyone knows Members of Congress have their own websites, so running ads to draw constituents there is unnecessary. Others say they generally ignore search ads because they seem opportunistic or irrelevant.

We asked the older Raleigh group what a fair price would be for a search ad about their Congressman being displayed one time. They would generally be OK with a cost in the range of $0.01 to $0.05 per search ad. We also asked this question of the younger Raleigh group and they would be OK with a cost of $0.10 to $0.50 per search ad.

The younger Las Vegas group generally likes search ads more than display ads. They like the idea of an ad being displayed that is related to what they are searching for rather than just having random ads appear.

We asked the younger Las Vegas respondents if they believe that it is a good idea for a "Michael Adams" to use taxpayer dollars to run ads like those on a search engine. One respondent said

that she supports using taxpayer money for those ads if it is a taxpayer issue, and not advertising something to advance the Congressman's agenda. One respondent, Christopher, is the only one in this group who opposed taxpayer money being used in this way. We asked him how Members of Congress should communicate messages to their constituents that could appear in search ads. He responded that they should communicate in the same ways they did before the Internet existed.

The younger Raleigh group also has mixed feelings about search ads being used by their Congressman. One respondent told us that she likes the ideas of search ads appearing that are relevant to what she is searching for. Those who oppose the use of taxpayer money being used for Congressional search ads told us that it could done for free through a Google search if the person knows what he or she is specifically looking for. We also heard that some do not click on those ads most of the time because they are concerned about computer viruses and the search ad being associated with a gimmick. Another respondent told us that so few people would benefit from seeing search ads, he does not see the point.

2) **Search ads related to Members' contact information generated the highest click-through rates, while job fair and survey ads generated the highest conversion rates**

Search ads, in contrast to display ads, generally generate a far higher percentage of clicks because they are by their nature highly-targeted to the audiences that view them. The following are the click-through rates for search ads, denoted by the category of official online advertising:

| Types of Search Ads | Click Through Rate |
|---|---|
| Office Internship | *2.58% |
| Townhall | *2.53% |
| Members' Contact Info | 2.28% |
| Natural Disaster Relief | *1.59% |
| Member Appearances | *1.44% |
| Tele-townhall | 1.27% |
| E-Newsletter | 1.23% |
| Average for Total | 0.97% |
| Congressional Art Competition | 0.83% |
| Academy Nomination | 0.58% |
| Issue | 0.46% |
| Survey | 0.37% |
| Job Fair | 0.26% |

*based on 50,000 impressions or fewer*

For search ads with 50,000 impressions or greater, advertisements about Members' contact information had the best click-through rate (2.28%). When looking at specific advertisements

meant to promote the Member's contact information, there were a variety of calls-to-action to get viewers to click. The most effective call-to-action for this official online activity was "contact," with a click-through rate of 2.59%.

The following is a table of search ad conversion rates for different types of official online ads:

| Types of Search Ads | Conversion Rate |
|---|---|
| Survey | 16.64% |
| Job Fair | 15.10% |
| Tele-townhall | 12.12% |
| E-Newsletter | 9.31% |
| Average for Total | 8.43% |
| Townhall | *6.74% |
| Member Appearances | *4.82% |
| Members' Contact Info | 2.14% |

*based on 50,000 impressions or fewer*

The following is a graphical representation of the click-through rates and conversion rates of official online activities for search ads that had 50,000 impressions or greater:
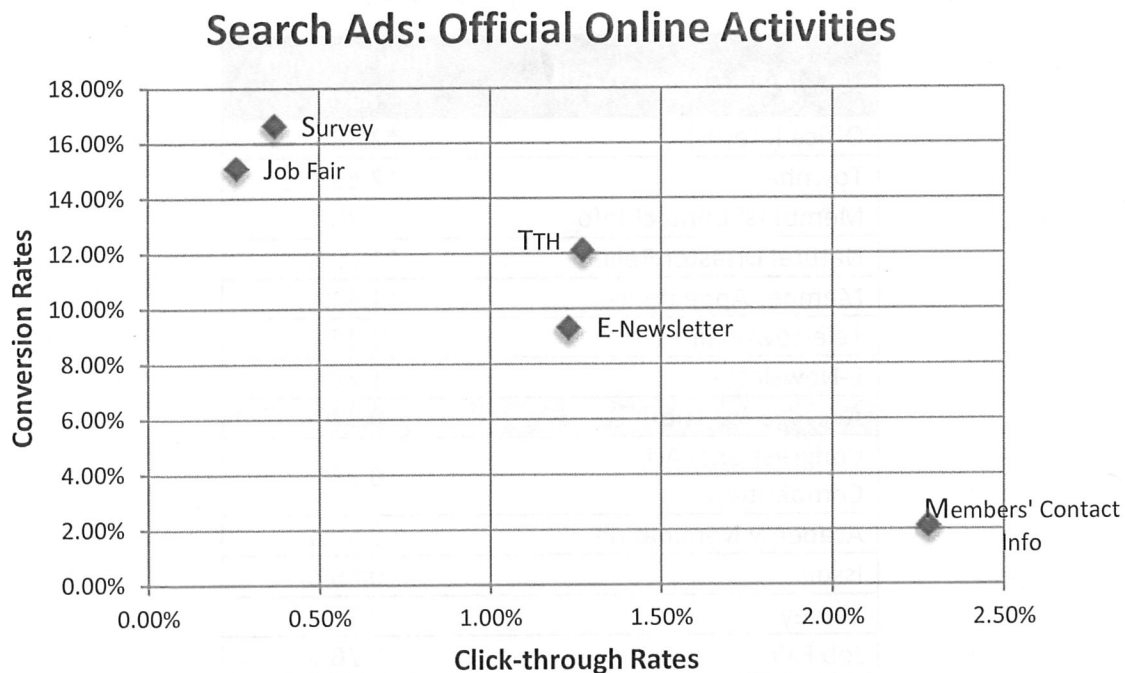


There is a prominent inverse correlation between click-through rates and conversion rates for search ads. We do not know the reason for this and can merely speculate.

**3) For search ads, "contact" is the best call-to-action in terms of the click-through rate; "take the survey" will get the highest conversion rate**

Below is a list of calls-to-action based on their click-through rates. Please note that while the first two items on the list scored highest, they had very small sample sizes. Over time, we hope to have a larger sample size in order to determine if, indeed, the terms "register" and "apply" are better performers than the word "contact."

| Search Ads Types of Calls-to-Action | Click Through Rate |
| --- | --- |
| "Register" | *4.48% |
| "Apply" | *2.58% |
| "Contact" | 2.06% |
| "Hear From You" | *1.78% |
| "Follow" | *1.59% |
| "Learn More" | 1.46% |
| "Sign Up" | 1.10% |
| "Join" | *0.97% |
| **Average for Total** | **0.97%** |
| "Keep In Touch" | *0.85% |
| "Keep You Informed" | *0.79% |
| "Wants to" | *0.69% |
| "Make" | *0.60% |
| "Attend" | *0.51% |
| "Listen In" | *0.47% |
| "Receive" | *0.47% |
| "Subscribe" | *0.46% |
| "Connect" | *0.37% |
| "Take the survey" | 0.37% |
| "Get" | *0.33% |
| **None** | 0.30% |
| "Tell" | *0.29% |
| "Submit" | *0.23% |
| "RSVP" | 0.06% |
| "Learn how" | *0.00% |
| "Stay Updated" | *0.00% |

*\* 50,000 impressions or less*

Among calls to action that appeared in ads with more than 50,000 impressions, "contact" is the best call-to-action for search ads, with a click-through rate of 2.06%. The worst call-to-action is "RSVP," with a rate of 0.06%. Here are the results for conversion rates, based on different calls-to-action:

| Search Ads Types of Calls-to-Action | Conversion Rate |
|---|---|
| "Join" | *23.91% |
| "Hear From You" | *20.55% |
| "Take the survey" | *19.92% |
| "RSVP" | 14.18% |
| "Register" | *11.33% |
| "Sign Up" | 10.94% |
| None | 10.43% |
| "Get" | *9.82% |
| Average for Total | 8.43% |
| "Attend" | *7.69% |
| "Contact" | 7.69% |
| "Keep In Touch" | *4.03% |
| "Learn More" | 1.13% |
| "Follow" | *0.92% |
| "Receive" | *0.87% |

*50,000 impressions or less*

"RSVP" has the highest conversion rate for search ads with 50,000 impressions or greater, with a rate of 14.18%. The call-to-action with the lowest conversion rate, with 50,000 impressions or greater, is "learn more" (1.13%).

The following is a graphical representation of the click-through rates and conversion rates of calls-to-action for search ads that had 50,000 impressions or greater:



Search Ads: Calls-to-Action
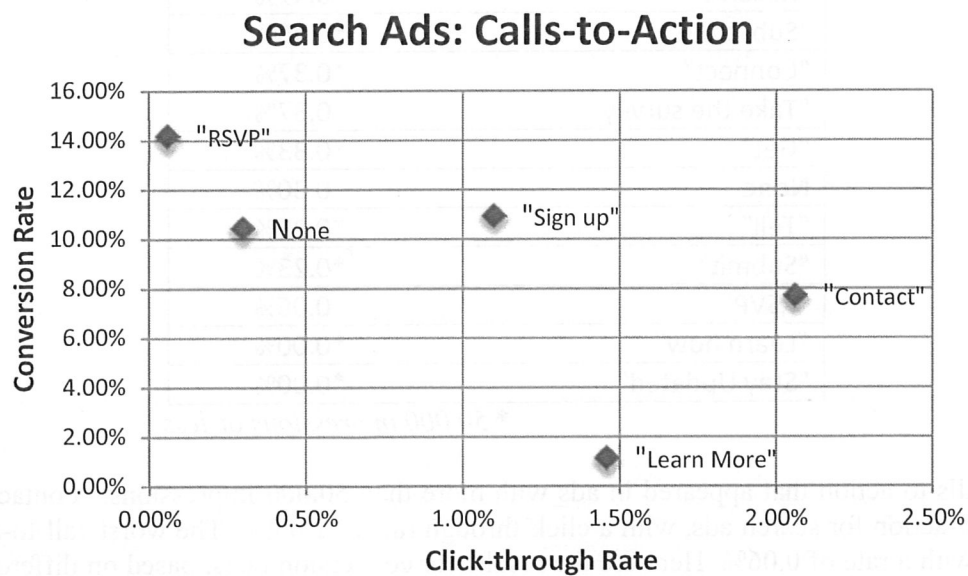
## D) FACEBOOK ADS

As detailed on page 11, the Facebook story is a complex one. While the average "cost per 'like'"[23] falls somewhere between $3.40 and $13.70 depending upon the strategy being used, "cost per 'like'" is not the only way to measure effectiveness.

Indeed, looking beyond the "cost per 'like'" suggests that as a time and resource investment, Facebook is an equally important component of a House office's communications strategy. For example, according to Facebook's own statistics, a typical Member of Congress has, on average, 4,500 "likes." Assuming every one of those people lived in the Member's district (and clearly not all do), that represents a fraction of one percent of the district—a limited reach. But recall that the average Facebook user has 130 "friends." Multiply that 4,500 by 130, and the average Member has a reach of 585,000 Facebook users who are either "likes" or friends of "likes." [24]

To be sure, not every Facebook "friend" is going to see every post by a person who likes a Member of Congress. But as a tool to enhance a Member's reach, Facebook offers considerable capabilities. (See case study referenced on page 11.) And, recently, Facebook vendor iConstituent introduced new analytical tools to help Members better track their presence in the Facebook space.[25] These include reach measurements, unique visitors, and audience growth figures.

1) **Once respondents learn how inexpensive Facebook ads are, they view them far more favorably. Yet, while many see the value in these ads, others raise various objections**

We showed all respondents in our four focus groups some examples of Congressional Facebook ads; most respondents had at least some experience with Facebook. While some raised objections to the use of Facebook ads by Members of Congress, respondents were generally supportive of this use of taxpayer money. They became even more supportive of these ads after finding out how cheap it is to run them as opposed to sending traditional mail pieces to constituents.

Among those in the older Las Vegas and Raleigh groups, we heard reasons why those ads should and should not run. For those who support the use of Facebook ads, we heard that by viewing those ads constituents can learn about someone trying to help their district. Also, we heard that it is a form of outreach, and the Congressman would be able to reach a wide range of constituents.

For those in the older groups who oppose the use of Facebook ads by their Congressman, we heard that if constituents want to find information, they will seek that information on their own.

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[23] "Like" is a Facebook designation that shows the Facebook user somehow endorses or supports a person, group, business, or some other entity. Typically, "friend" visiting that Facebook user's page can see who that Facebook user "likes." Also, when that Facebook user re-posts something about the person/thing/entity he or she "likes," that appears on that user's friends' news feed.

[24] That assumes no overlap among the 585,000, which is clearly not the case.

[25] http://iconstituent.com/in-the-news/allfacebookcom-us-congress-members-get-improved-facebook-analytics/

It does not need to be pushed to them. Others were concerned about the cost, and the possibility of unwanted pop-ups appearing on their computer screens. Also, some do not want others to believe that they "like" their Congressman if one of his ads appears on their Facebook page.[26]

We told the older Raleigh group that it would cost about one-sixth of one cent for a Facebook ad to be shown to a single person one time, and they became more supportive of the idea. They believe that it costs $0.50 or $1.00 to design, print, and mail regular mail pieces that they receive from their Congressman, so Facebook is very inexpensive by comparison. We asked the same question of the younger Raleigh group and they believe that it costs between $0.30 and $2.00 per mail piece. Knowing how much money it saves, they would agree with their Congressman's use of Facebook ads to save money.

The older Raleigh group expressed concerns that Congressional incumbents already have enough built-in advantages, and the United States Postal Service would be hurt by the use of Facebook ads because they would receive less money from regular mail being sent to constituents.

Among the younger Las Vegas and Raleigh groups, respondents like the idea of Facebook ads to learn about their Congressman; some were unaware their Member is accessible via Facebook. They believe Facebook-posted information would be spread to many people; it is cost-effective; and it would be environmentally-friendly to avoid printing. Some also appreciate that they can "like" whomever they want, allowing them to choose which subjects they receive Facebook updates on in an environment in which they are comfortable.

For those who have negative feelings about Facebook ads in the younger Las Vegas and Raleigh groups, we heard that the Facebook ads would be used to benefit the Congressman's career. Others told us that they would ignore them because they do not go on Facebook to view Congressional ads (or ads generally). One respondent told us that Facebook ads would never reach her because she only looks at direct mail. Another questioned whether both Facebook ads and direct mail pieces would be used at the same time. If so, it is unclear how much money would really be saved.
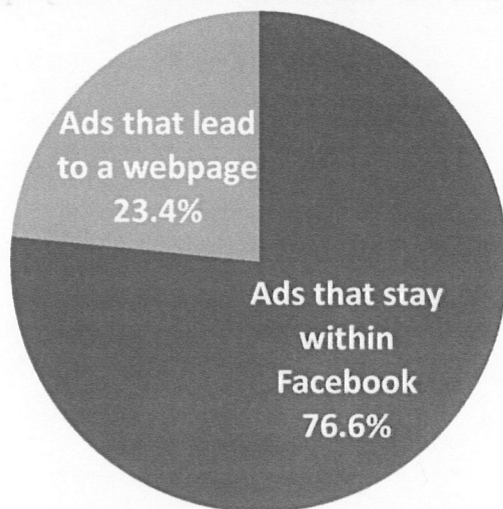
2) **Facebook advertisements that stay within Facebook have a higher click-through rate than advertisements that link to an external webpage**

Facebook advertisements can do one of two things: link the person clicking to a page within Facebook, or link him/her to a webpage outside of Facebook. The ads look very similar to one another, with the exception that the "webpage" ads show a URL.

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[26] This respondent mistakenly believes that when one Facebook user views another Facebook user's page, the former can view the ads that are being served to the latter.

The data in our sample consisted of approximately 89.5 million Facebook ad impressions. Here is a graph showing the percentage breakout for the two types of ads:

**Types of Facebook Ads Analyzed Based on Aggregate Impressions**

Ads that lead to a webpage 23.4%

Ads that stay within Facebook 76.6%

While there is no conversion data available for advertisements that link outside of Facebook, we were able to compare the click-through rates for these two categories of Facebook advertisements. Advertisements that stay within Facebook have a click-through rate of 0.029%, while advertisements that link to a webpage have a lower click-through rate of 0.017%.

3) **Facebook ads experience low click-through rates and high conversion rates. Also, the average cost to get someone to "like" a Congressperson's page ranges from $3.40 to $13.70**

Within our sample of Facebook ads, we isolated the ads that linked to the Congressperson's Facebook page, and asked the viewer to "like" the page. Within this universe, the average click-through rate was 0.029%, and the average conversion rate was 37.72%. It should be noted that the conversion rates for Facebook ads are typically referred to as "like" rates, since this is found by the number of people who liked the page divided by the number of people who clicked.

It should also be noted that when the ad was targeted towards friends of fans, the click-through rate was slightly higher at 0.032%.

We then looked at the total dollars spent on these Facebook ads, and divided this by the total number of conversions. We found that the average cost per new "like" was $13.70. As referenced above, another vendor claims its average "cost per 'like'" is much lower at $3.40.[27]

While the average was $13.70, the costs to acquire each new "like" generally ranged from $5.70 to $24.30. Also, there was one notable exception of a cost of $86.67 per new "like" for one Congressperson. After poring over the data, there was no readily apparent reason why this exception occurred.

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[27] This difference is based on a variety of factors, such as whether the Facebook ads are bought on a "cost per click" or a "cost per impression" basis, whether they are being strategically targeted to reach particular constituent groups, how long the effort runs, and who the online ad agency is that is doing the purchasing.

# GLOSSARY

**Call to action:** A call-to-action is a word or phrase used in an advertisement, and it tries to entice the viewers to click on the ad and become engaged.

**Click-through rate (CTR):** The click-through rate (CTR) is measured by dividing the number of clicks on the ad by the number of ad impressions.

**Conversion rate:** The conversion rate is measured by taking the number of conversions—in other words, the number of people who take the action suggested by the ad—and dividing it by the number of clicks.

**Display ad:** Display advertisements typically contain text, logos, or images. These are the ads one commonly finds on news and entertainment sites, for example. The most common size display ad is 300 pixels by 250 pixels (almost square); most ads from Members of Congress are this size.

**Facebook ad:** These are ads that appear on the right-hand side of a Facebook user's page, and they can link to either the advertiser's own Facebook page, or to a website that is external to Facebook. Often these ads are run in order to build "likes" on Facebook.

**Impression:** Ad impressions are the number of times a display or text ad was requested and presumably seen by users. Ad impressions are often sold on a cost-per-thousand (or CPM) basis. Ads are also sold on a cost-per-click basis, where the advertiser only pays when a visitor actually clicks on the ad they are viewing.

**"Like":** This is a designation on Facebook that indicates that a Facebook user is a fan of another person, or endorses a group, team, product, business, or other entity. When a Facebook user "likes" someone or something, that information is typically viewable by that person's Facebook "friends."

**Pixel:** The smallest element of an image that can be individually processed in a video display system. Online ads are measured in pixels.

**Search ad:** Search advertisements are small, text-based ads. They include a hyperlink to another webpage where the viewer can learn more information, and they generally appear on search engines such as Google or Yahoo when viewers conduct a search.

## BEST PRACTICES

1) Ads should imply you want some sort of dialogue with constituents, or you want to assist a broad category of constituents in some tangible way. If an ad doesn't do either of those things (and many don't), think twice before running it.

2) Stop plastering display ads for "narrowly-focused" topics across tens of thousands of computers in your district, such as ads for academy nominations and the Congressional Art Competition. They don't build goodwill for most constituents. Instead, run ads promoting services that matter most to constituents, such as helping with Social Security and Medicare benefits.

3) It's far better to promote physical townhalls than tele-townhalls. Many constituents are still not familiar with tele-townhalls, and some think you're running an ad to announce that you're "phoning it in," as opposed to appearing in person.

4) Use online ads to harness constituent interest in news events, and to be a resource to help constituents in an emergency. But be sure to downplay your personal role in helping in a crisis; instead, provide usable information that is not overly self-promoting.

5) Position the topic of your display ad more prominently, and yourself less prominently. There are inadvertent pitfalls to getting the proportions wrong—such as having constituents think you are in favor of something you actually oppose.

6) Don't run display ads to build e-newsletter subscribers unless you have a lot of money to spend; instead, build e-newsletter subscribers by sending out e-newsletters to a list you've procured from a quality list vendor.

7) Promote online surveys as an effective way to demonstrate a willingness to listen to constituents, as well as a way to build e-newsletter subscriptions.

8) Be careful when running online ads to be mindful of how certain words will be interpreted in certain contexts, such as calling yourself "Representative" as opposed to "Congressman."

9) There's a widely-held perception that display ads are campaign ads, which viewers work to tune out, so try to have ads stand out by being substantive and constituent-focused.

10) Focus your search ad budget on promoting the House Administration-approved activities that generate the most clicks and conversions, and for those ads use the calls-to-action that are likeliest to generate constituent engagement.

11) Don't rely merely on the "like" measurement for Facebook, as it obscures other benefits of the medium; instead, focus on the total reach, which is considerable.

12) Promote the massive cost and environmental savings of online ads relative to printed mail.